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Cities as battlefields: understanding how the Nation of Islam impacts on civic engagement, environmental racism, and community development in a low income neighborhood

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This article challenges social (dis)organization theory by investigating the impact of religious culture on civic engagement. Using qualitative data[1] from 'Bridge View,' a historically African-American neighborhood in San Francisco experiencing environmental racism, this article asks: (1) How does the Nation of Islam (NOI) affect social organization in a low-income community? And (2) How does the metropolitan distribution of wealth, opportunity, and resources play out in urban space? The findings suggest that the NOI has often had to replace important public institutions responsible for providing social services in low-income communities—police protection, community welfare, and education. These findings suggest that we need to rethink the relationship between race, culture, structure, and political mobilization and incorporate a more fluid conceptualization of culture into social (dis)organization theory.

Decades of social science research have documented the distinctive role of religion in the lives of African-Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). According to domestic and international polls on religious beliefs and commitment, 'American blacks are, by some measures, the most religious people in the world' (Gallup & Castelli, 1989, p. 122). Historical and empirical studies consistently report higher rates of church attendance, membership, belief, and practice within the Black community. Additionally, 'Black churches tend to participate in a greater range of community programs' (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 187).

Despite the substantial research conducted on the Black church in the United States, few studies focus on the Nation of Islam. The few studies of the Nation of

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Islam that do exist suggest the power of the Black Muslim community to build social assets in impoverished and under-resourced communities (Gardell, 1996; Akom, 2003). Yet, virtually no known literature exists that describes the mechanisms and processes through which religious culture leads to civic engagement and community organizing for Black Muslims in the African-American community. This empirical oversight persists even though Islam is the fastest growing religion in America and Europe.[2]

Using qualitative data from Bridge View,[3] a historically African-American neighborhood in San Francisco, this article illustrates the power of Islamic cultural production, Black self-determination, and community uplift for facilitating civic engagement, community organizing, and transformative resistance within the African-American community. In particular, by using data from more than two years of qualitative research in Bridge View, this article has two primary objectives: first, to incorporate a more dynamic conceptualization of cultural production into social (dis)organization theory; and second, to examine how the effects of racial segregation—such as environmental racism and depopulation—impact on local community participation, paying special attention to the role of culture and agency in political mobilization. My guiding questions are as follows: (1) How does the Nation of Islam affect social organization in a low-income neighborhood? (2) How do African-American working people struggle and survive outside traditional organizations and mainstream social movements? And (3) How does the metropolitan distribution of wealth, opportunity, and resources play out in urban space?

In attempting to address these questions I also provide important commentaries on the relationship between neighborhood poverty and critical aspects of social capital theory such as social isolation, collective efficacy, and community control (Small & McDermott, 2006). According to Mario Luis Small, 'social organization theorists agree that community participation is affected by structural conditions,[4] but surprisingly little is understood, with any clarity, about the mechanisms underlying this process' (Small, 2002, p. 2). Small's own work attempts to open this 'racial gap' by examining one aspect of social capital—community participation (Small, 2004). In Small's investigation of Villa Victoria, a predominantly Puerto Rican housing complex, he finds that neighborhood levels of community participation declined even though the structural conditions of the neighborhood[5] were such that community participation should have risen (or at least remained stable). Small's work is brilliant and insightful precisely because it suggests that 'structural conditions may not bear the one-to-one cause-and-effect relationship to participation in poor neighborhoods that researchers have implicitly assumed' (Small, 2004, p. 63). Following Small, I argue that the case of the NOI in Bridge View challenges social scientists to rethink the relationship between structural conditions and political mobilization in manner that is more consistent with actual lived experience (Small, 2004, p. 63).

This article is divided into seven sections. The first section introduces social (dis)organization theory. The second and third sections describe the research methods and setting. The fourth section focuses on the impact of environmental racism in Bridge View and introduces the concept of 'negative social capital.' Here I argue that

the NOI has had to make up for, and in some instances replace, the key public insti-tutions responsible for providing civic goods and services—legal protection, physical safety, health, welfare, and education. The fifth section discusses cities as battle-fields—highly racialized spaces where some communities are differentially and systematically marginalized while others are supported by public and private agencies to prosper and thrive. The sixth section discusses the grass roots organizing of the NOI and the power of Black Muslim cultural production for promoting political mobilization. The final section examines the mechanisms by which the NOI resists neighborhood poverty, paying special attention to race, culture, agency, and alterna-tive responses to combating structural poverty (Small, 2004, p. 13).

Social (dis)organization theory

Social disorganization theory argues that neighborhood poverty (among other factors) produces socially disorganized communities (Small, 2004, p. 5). The theory was first developed by Shaw and McKay in the 1940s to address differences in crime rates between Chicago neighborhoods. The researchers found that crime rates in Chicago varied by levels of social organization—which they defined, in part, as the ability and willingness of residents to exercise informal social control over local indi-viduals and institutions (Small, 2002).[6] According to Shaw and McKay (1942), neighborhoods were high in crime because of three primary causes: (a) high poverty; (b) residential instability; and (c) ethnic heterogeneity.

Contemporary researchers have produced a more nuanced portrait of urban life by exploring whether social organization theory can have positive impacts beyond simply reducing crime.[7] Scholars such as Venkatesh (2006, Small (2004), and Pattillo–McCoy (1999, 2007) have investigate a broad range of neighborhood-level variables including the mechanisms by which neighborhood poverty affects local participation, the social ties between the Black poor and the Black middle class, boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate economic relations, and the level of voluntary community participation. This article is specifically concerned with the last factor in relation to Black political mobilization, institutional racism, and the role of Islamic cultural production in the remapping of the Black American Ghetto.[8]

Previous discussions of social disorganization had several limitations. First, much of the work has been criticized for perpetuating a view of the Black American ghetto as inherently pathological and dysfunctional—leading to the false perception of 'ghetto life' (in particular the Black poor) as socially isolated, socially disorganized, and detached from the values of the American mainstream (Duneier, 1992, 1999; Katz, 1997; Wacquant, 1997). Second, the theory is generally weak in illustrating how cultural factors, in the midst of structural dilapidation and decay, lead to forms of social organization—particularly in predominantly low-income African-American neighborhoods like Bridge View (Small, 2002).[9]

The third problem, as Sampson and Wilson (1995, p. 53) point out, is that 'schol-ars have dismissed the relevance of culture based on the analysis of census data that provide no measure of culture whatsoever.' As a result of these theoretical and

empirical oversights a central tenet of the original theory—that culture matters—is hardly ever directly engaged. My research begins to address previous oversights by investigating how the religious culture of the NOI—including its teachings, rituals, rhetorical strategies, and the ideology of Black Power—are strategies of action for community participation and political mobilization in the Bridge View community.

YPAR: engaging with communities on questions of social justice[10]

Following in the footsteps of the important work conducted by the Participatory Action Research Collective pioneered by Michelle Fine and Maria Torre at CUNY, this youth participatory action research project (YPAR) is part of a larger comparative racial/ethnicity study examining three Bay Area neighborhoods in relation to Black out-migration, community organizing, and educational achievement.[11]

More specifically, The Black Out-Migration Project (BOM)[12] is a coalition of high school and college students in and around the Bay Area who are trained at San Francisco State University's Cesar Chavez Institute, as well as in neighborhood community centers, to undertake their own investigation of the relationship between race, space, and organizational resources in selected Bay Area neighborhoods and schools. Directed by me, and working with a corps of social science researchers, graduate students, and professional film-makers, youth researchers conduct surveys, interviews, and focus groups that help us grapple with the reality of racism in the heart of liberalism and the ways that race still impacts on access to institutional resources and privileges in what is arguably the most liberal region in the United States (Fine, 2004).

The first phase of our project involves intensive 'research camps' where students are trained in local civil rights history, critical race theory, feminist thought, and indigenous knowledge (to name a few), as well as being immersed in qualitative and quantitative research methods including survey design and observational research strategies. During the second phase of our project we craft research questions, inter-rogate each other for potential bias, and work through the specifics of research design and data collection. In our third phase young people and adults investigate and denat-uralize the conditions of their everyday lives by collecting newspaper clippings, demo-graphic information, and neighborhood announcements, as well as conducting over 30 open-ended interviews with community residents. Our fourth phase is an action phase conducted in concert with community residents. Some of the methods we use include: participatory surveys, participant observation, photo-voice, focus groups, web research,[13] identity maps, individual interviews, archival research, oral histories, policy analyses, and participatory videos (i.e. short films and feature-length docu-mentary movies).

According to Fine and Torre, PAR is a methodological stance rooted in the belief 'that valid knowledge is produced only in collaboration and in action' (Fine and Torre, n.d.).[14] Unlike traditional forms of qualitative inquiry, PAR recognizes that individ-uals and groups who are 'studied' possess critical 'funds of knowledge', and as such must be repositioned as subjects and architects of their own agency (Torre, 2005).

The setting: Bridge View in historical context

African-Americans first moved to Bridge View at the onset of World War II when the US Navy took over the shipyard and well-paying jobs drew African-American workers to the area.[15] Processes of racial segregation ensured that Bridge View rapidly became one of the only majority African-American neighborhoods in San Francisco, whose residents developed a thriving community, purchasing homes and creating a commercial area along its main streets (Massey and Denton, 1993). Over the last 10–15 years, however, as employment opportunities have deteriorated and the cost of living in San Francisco has risen, many residents have been forced to move out of Bridge View, leaving behind a neighborhood in the midst of intense racial, spatial, and economic transformation.[16]

According to the 2000 census, approximately 48% of Bridge View residents are African-American, 23% are Asian and Pacific Islanders, 17% are Latina/o, 10% are White, and 1.3% are American Indian. Income levels are significantly lower and unemployment rates significantly higher than for San Francisco as a whole: Nearly 49% of Bridge View residents have annual incomes below US$15,000, while only 20% of the city's population as a whole have incomes that low, and the unemployment rate is 13% in Bridge View, more than twice as high as the city as a whole.[17] Complicating this picture is the fact that Bridge View has more children than any other neighborhood in the city, yet one of the highest infant mortality rates of any ZIP code in California; more liquor stores than grocery stores; a high homicide rate,[18] and low-performing schools.[19] When added together it is easy to see why some Bridge View residents refer to their community as the 'hood of San Francisco'.

The evidence of things unseen: environmental racism in Bridge View

According to Robert Bullard's (1990) book, *Dumping in Dixie*, Black communities, because of their political and economic vulnerabilities, are routinely targeted for environmental hazards. Yet research on environmental quality in the Black community has been minimal or non-existent. Instead social scientists have focused on crime, drugs, poverty, unemployment, family dissolution, anything and everything except the very 'thing' which is exacting the heaviest toll (in health and environmental cost) on the Black community. Even more surprising is the fact that there are few studies that document the ways in which Black people cope—in terms of both social activism and psycho-emotionally—with environmental stressors such as toxic waste (Bullard, 1990). Part of this oversight, according to Bullard, 'is rooted in historical and ideological factors and in the composition of the core environmental movement and its largely white middle-class profile' (Bullard, 1990, 2).

This research attempts to close the 'racial gap' between environmentalist and social justice advocacy groups by studying the impact of environmental racism among Black and other racially identified groups in the Bridge View community. The problem of pollution in Bridge View is not a new phenomenon. Historically, toxic dumping has always followed the 'path of least resistance' and Bridge View is no exception. For

example, the neighborhood is home to one federal Superfund site,[20] a polluting PG&E Power Plant, a sewage treatment plant that handles 80% of the city's solid wastes, 100 Brownfield sites,[21] 187 leaking underground fuel tanks (LUFTS), and more than 124 hazardous waste handlers regulated by the USEPA. Additionally, the Bridge View community has 10 times as many contaminated water dischargers on a per capita basis as the rest of San Francisco, four times as many polluted air dischargers, five times as many facilities storing acutely hazardous materials, three times as many underground storage tanks, and four times as many contaminated industrial sites (Rechtschaffen, 1996).

In Bridge View, contaminated public spaces, including schools, housing projects, and post offices, are common—so common that when children, elders, and infants become sick (and sometimes die) while living in, working in, or attending schools, it is hard to know which government institution or private corporation to hold directly responsible. Children attending schools adjacent to the Bridge View Power Plant exhibit high incidences of asthma, and allergic and hypersensitive reactions. A local newspaper investigation identified a cluster of infants who died before their first birthday in the radiation-contaminated South Basin region of the neighborhood.[22] Most lived in the Ella Baker housing projects. According to a 2006 community health report, one-sixth of Bridge View children have asthma—a higher rate than for any other ZIP code in the city.[23]

Not surprisingly, the most adversely affected by these detrimental environmental conditions are the 12,000 residents or 4400 households living on the east side of Bridge View in close proximity to heavy industry, power plants, and truck traffic. Of these households, approximately 70% are African-American; 15% are Asian (primarily Chinese and South Pacific Islanders) and the remainder Latina/o or Caucasian. The east side of Bridge View is also the poorest section of the community: At least 40% of these residents live at subsistence income levels. Two-thirds of the approximately 1110 households within a one-mile radius of the PG&E power plant live in low-income public housing.

The health of these residents in particular, and Bridge View residents in general, has been negatively impacted by the ongoing environmental contamination of the community's soil and water with particulates, pesticides, petrochemicals, heavy metals, asbestos, and radioactive materials. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable residents—infants, children, and the elderly—are the most affected by these environmental health threats in the Bridge View community and, as such, are the ones who stand the most to gain from the NOI's political mobilization efforts, community control strategies, and community defense.

Negative social capital and the Nation of Islam

Negative social capital, according to Wacquant (1998), refers to the ways in which the critical state and social institutions responsible for providing civic goods and services whereby social capital is formed (for example the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency or the police department) have turned 'into instruments of surveillance,

suspicion, and exclusion rather than vehicles of social integration and trust building' (1998, p. 25). The conceptualization of social capital as relational—potentially positive or negative—is extremely valuable as a corrective to the pathological and behavioristic approaches which have dominated recent research on urban poverty and the so-called 'urban underclass.'

In what follows, I draw on the concept of negative social capital to highlight what I believe to be a significant contribution to debates surrounding social organization in the Black American ghetto. That is, in low-income neighborhoods like Bridge View, experiencing the independent and mutually interlocking factors of economic withdrawal, racial containment, residential instability, high infant mortality, gentrification, violence, crime, and environmental racism, community institutions such as the NOI have had to make up for, and in some instances replace, the public institutions responsible for providing key civic goods and services: legal protection, physical safety, welfare, education, and healthcare. In the case of Bridge View in particular, environmental racism, massive gentrification, and community displacement projects have placed the NOI in the position of politically mobilizing and defending the community from what one resident called 'the colonizers of city hall, white developers, and the police all at the same time.'

The NOI's public presence on the streets of Bridge View can been seen in their self-presentation. NOI men dressed in suits passing out community flyers communicate non-verbal messages to the community concerning professional responsibility, community uplift, and the NOI's commitment to serving and educating the most downtrodden segments of a heterogeneous Black community.[24] Additionally, the NOI's calls for 'full employment for our people,' 'decent housing and education,' and 'an end to police brutality' are not only reminiscent of the Black Panther Party but are central to cultivating community trust, collective efficacy, and political mobilization. Because of their everyday presence in Bridge View—ranging from schools to the streets—many public gathering are infused with subtle yet distinct Black Muslim cultural aesthetics, sense of values, and communal ethics, emerging from their hybridization of Islamic and Christian cultural practices. The following field note from a meeting in June held at the San Francisco Board of Supervisors office with about 150 people in attendance serves to illustrate this point. Minister Ali began:

> I represent a community that has been historically abused, misrepresented, underrepresented and sometimes non-represented. My concern is that the community has been the victim of one of the most blatant cases of environmental racism on record…. Environmental racism is defined as racial discrimination and race-based differential enforcement of environmental rules and regulations, the intentional or unintentional targeting of minority communities for the settling of polluting industries…. Here's a community that has been exposed to untold levels of asbestos, arsenic, and other inorganics, and yet, to this date, a year or more since this known exposure, by the admissions of the Health Department's Dr. Bililic, there has been no testing of the community of Bridge View, no hearing, no formal discussion on the issue facing this community. I have gone door to door, and every house that I have gone to throughout the community, someone has been ill affected by the blatant disregard of their health by the Evergreen corporation and its subsidiaries and subcontractors…. Yet it appears that Evergreen has purchased silence, capitulation, where

no one seems to have the courage other than, I guess, the two Supervisors who voted against Evergreen…. No one appears to have the courage to challenge them….

Following Minister Ali, speaker after speaker spoke of their illness, outrage, and concern, as the Fruit of Islam (FOI), dressed in dark suits, stood as witnesses like African statues against the silhouette of the chamber. The Black Muslim collective identity that Minister Ali and the FOI embody is part of a cultural repertoire that resonates among non-Muslim African-Americans as a powerful cultural tool for speaking truth to power. According to one long-term resident the NOI's lexicon of liberation, economic and political agenda, and ideological pronouncements mark a distinct and important break with Black Christian civil rights leaders:

> It took Muslim Minister Ali to take a stand and take our movement to the highest level with the backing of all members of the community—Latinos, Samoans, white, Blacks, Asians and those of every race. The community stands united because our leadership is not tainted with blood money…. We take no instruction for any corrupt entity…. Minister Ali has put to shame those few so-called Black sell outs … men of the cloth … by explaining the facts…. It is the truth that will make one free…. Truth does not come easy … especially with the main media on the side of the devil and lies….

The NOI's use of framing narratives and discourses to mobilize inter-racial support provided direction to Bridge View residents on how to engage effectively in political mobilization, and their powerful rhetorical strategies reflect some of the aspirations of the neighborhood's working-class residents. The following interview with Brother Rakim, an NOI member for seven years, serves to illustrate this point:

> You know there are a lot of silent voices that are going on in the community…. There's a lot of diversion in the community…. They're not trying to shut Evergreen down…. They're just trying to use different issues like, there needs to be more Black construction workers…. They're trying to use economic motivation to distract us from really what the core issues are which is the company has committed some immoral practices…. Literally the company is causing the death of people…. In our OWN COMMUNITY…. In our community they have exposed our children to a wide range of health problems…. Companies like this need to be completely destroyed…. You know the way we go about doing our business is the right way…. And it all start on a grassroots level… You have to let the community know first…. Make yourself visible…. You have to let the community know about what's really goin' on…. You have to educate our people…. You know it's really hard to do stuff like this … it's hard to educate our folks…. Because our folks … we're busy doing our own thing…. Caught up in our daily lives…. But with the persistence of the NOI, in the body of believers, in the wonderful leadership, the strong organization, and that's what's really key, that's what's keeping the movement in intact…. The Nation is like the military in a certain sense; there's a chain of command…. The way in which we communicate, and disperse knowledge to the body of believers…. And there's a certain forceful way that the members move out and carry out the desired goals and results…. The NOI has the best followers that any organization has…. We're taught to hear and obey…. Not to be blind fools, we're intelligent people…. But we move out with the spirit and the desire to save our people and that is rooted in the love that we have for our people.

Two of the reasons that the NOI's message resonates so powerfully in Bridge View are: (1) Black working-class residents in this community have been completely marginalized from meaningful political leverage in the city for decades; and (2)

Bridge View residents have endured years and years of literal occupation by outside institutions such as the Redevelopment Agency, the Evergreen Corporation, the Port of San Francisco and the San Francisco Police Department, to name a few—all seeking to re-engineer the neighborhood without significant community input.

As a result of these 'virtual occupations' the NOI has had to fight to secure a place for Black people in particular, and people of color in general, within the shifting contours of metropolitan development that accompany massive gentrification and community-displacement projects. These movements are not merely the background to the Black liberation struggle in Bridge View, rather they are at the core of how the movement is being constituted. Understanding these broader patterns of African-American political organizing in relation to negative social capital brings into focus a neglected chapter in the Black liberation struggle and underscores a trajectory of struggle that does not depend on the conflation of violence, protest, and nationalism that has hindered a complete understanding of the roots of Black power and Black self-determination in relation to environmental racism and systemic community underdevelopment (Self, 2003).

Cities as battlefields

Cities are battlefields—places where planners, developers, and capitalists utilize instruments of benign neglect, public policy, high technology, architectural design, and the militarization of urban space to remake the city in their interest and image (Davis, 1992). Beginning in the 1980s, gaining momentum in the 1990s, and continuing into the twenty-first century, planners, developers, and capitalists have hoped to restore property values in Bridge View by redeveloping land, clearing slums, constructing rapid transit, and reinventing the port—a slow, deliberate, and highly racialized re-imagining and re-engineering of old urban forms into new urban spaces. Seeking to revive one of the last remaining affordable parts of the city, these political interest groups (developers, planners, and policy-makers) are in the midst of turning Bridge View into a key site of capital accumulation. At the same time, the historically African-American community in Bridge View, along with communities of color in- and outside the neighborhood, has a very different vision of what it means to undergo an 'urban renaissance.' According to Fred, a long-time Bridge View resident:

> The community is angry…. The City and County of San Francisco have been consulting some members of the Restoration Advisory Board (RAB) who do not have the support of the community. Some Negroes will sell out their community for anything. These Negroes should remember that Bridge View is changing dramatically and in five years we will be lucky if 10 percent of the demographics are African-Americans in Bridge View.

Bridge View residents such as Fred envision a different urban renaissance, one shaped by the goals of the Black community and other communities of color; one that creates jobs, good schools, and economic growth on the communities' terms or at least with significant community input. In Bridge View, the goals of the community and the goals and methods of the developers clash as the re-engineering of the community, coupled with deep structural and economic changes, further disadvantages the Black

working class. In the tradition of community studies the rest of this article tells the story of this battle.

The Evergreen Corporation and the redevelopment of the shipyard

In 1974 the Navy pulled out of the shipyard and left behind dilapidating structures, rusting radiation laboratories, and worst of all toxic waste.[25] Twenty-five years later, the Evergreen Corporation, a company that specialized in owning and managing commercial and residential real estate, identified the shipyard as a profit making-venture, recognizing that toxic wastelands are a synonym for redevelopment in certain parts of urban America. One of the first victories for the Evergreen Corporation was to seize control of a former military gem in the North Bay. Two years later it was on the brink of losing its bid for the Bridge View shipyard when politically connected friends of Congressional Representatives and prominent San Francisco politicians told the Redevelopment Agency commissioners that Evergreen was the developer with the best interest of the community in mind. In the end, the commissioners—all of them mayoral appointees—voted for Evergreen to have the contract.

Over the years Evergreen has parlayed one contract into multiple contracts to such an extent that the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (SFRA) has entrusted almost its entire undeveloped coastline to a profit-driven corporation which is now proving very difficult to regulate or hold accountable for its actions. To be fair, Evergreen which had revenues of $16.3 billion in 2006, has provided job training for Bridge View residents, set up small businesses, and invested nearly $75 million dollars in the first phase of redevelopment. But it is what Evergreen has not done that has made Bridge View residents so distrustful of the company that specializes in military re-usage. Miss Scott, a long-term resident of Bridge View, is distrustful of company because 'they have told so many lies that they aren't even ashamed about lying anymore … they lie openly and honestly … and when they lie they act just like they're telling the truth…. I don't trust them any more than I trust a thief in a jewelry store….' Evergreen has reneged on many of its promises. For example, last year when the housing industry took a nose dive Evergreen pulled out on its promise to provide much needed rental housing to Bridge View residents, saying its profit margins were too low to make the rentals worthwhile. According to a local newspaper:[26]

> Part of the problem is systemic: The Redevelopment Agency hands over these giant projects to master, for-profit developers—who can then change the plans based on financial considerations, not community needs. And while Evergreen likes to tell decision makers of its massive size and resources, the actual work at these bases has been delegated to limited-liability subsidiaries with far fewer available assets.

The apparent contradiction between the what of social action (i.e. build responsibly in communities of color) and the how of social action (i.e. breaking promises and deception) is most obvious in its direct interaction with the NOI's private school.

The School of Islam

The School of Islam is a small private school that sits on hill with a birds-eye view of the Bridge View shipyard. Owned and operated by the NOI the school attracts mostly African-American students but also Latino, Asian, and Pacific Islander children, many of whom have had problems in the public schools system and whose parents cannot afford a private school. Standing outside the school, the children have been able to watch the heavy machinery digging into the hillside in preparation for 1600 condos and townhouses that Evergreen wants to build with exquisite bay views.

The most recent controversy over Evergreen's construction activity began in 2006–2007 when children at the School of Islam began getting sick with nose bleeds and having breathing problems as a result of the dust exposure from the construction occurring only 20–50 feet from the playground. For 13 months there are no data to show how much asbestos the School of Islam students were exposed to, either in the 10 months before construction started on the cleared site or for the first three months when Evergreen subcontractors began moving massive amounts of earth on the hill next to the school. Over the 2006–2007 year the San Francisco Department of Public Health has issued Evergreen three notices of violation for not following the city's dust mitigation plan and for problems in monitoring airborne asbestos. Additionally, Evergreen has stated that their asbestos monitors were not functioning properly for the three heaviest months of grading and digging so they threw out all of the data from that time. Evergreen's misconduct has continued despite multiple citations from the Health Department and the company has continued to prosper in spite of approximately 15 shutdowns when asbestos reached dangerous levels. According to Brother Rakim, an NOI member for the past 10 years:

> We have always believed that we cannot look at our children's suffering and not do the right thing … it is insulting that Evergreen will not act responsibly and help protect our children and protect our communities…. What Minister Farrakhan teaches is that 'organized falsehood is more powerful than unorganized truth'…. So as a community we have to organize and rise against these dirty real estate practices … we have to be bold enough and brave enough to stand up to the issues that are affecting our people…. The Nation has been and will continue to be spearheading this effort…. But there is a very much larger picture here…. And that is we are not just for the NOI, we teach that really all of our people are lost and found members of NOI…. So our fight is not just a fight to protect our children … but all children … because that is what Allah wants us to do….

Of all the problems affecting poor urban communities none is more pressing than environmental racism. This silent phenomenon wreaks havoc on the daily lives of community residents and increasingly spills over from one generation to the next in the form of cancer, asthma, infant mortality and other life-threatening diseases and illnesses that affect young and old, in and out of school. Although there are often forces in the community charged with protecting the public health, such as the San Francisco Department of Public Health, Bay Area Quality Management, state policies (like the asbestos Air Control Toxic Measure), The Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Substance Control, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, and Board of Supervisors to name a few—many of these agencies have been

co-opted by the deep pockets of the developers, or do not have enough power and authority to override mayoral appointees. Under the current system developers like Evergreen are accountable to no one except for community activists such as Bother Rakim and the rest of the NOI who through rhetorical skills, political mobilizing, and narrative framing establish the grounds for social action.

The NOI as a community institution

The NOI has a documented history of being involved in extra-religious civic, economic, and political activities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Lee, 1996). From an organizational perspective, the Black Muslim temple performs many different roles ranging from providing members with a strong spiritual base, political organization, and the community networks required for collective action (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984; Harris, 1994) to serving as a school, a bank, and at times a child care center (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998).

Research conducted by Verba *et al.* (1992) demonstrates that Black congregations are significantly more likely than White congregations to participate in civil rights activities and sponsor programs that benefit residents in their local communities. As one of the few institutions owned and operated by African-Americans, the Black Muslim temple, like the Black church, is an anchoring institution within the African-American community (DuBois 1899).

Closer examination of the NOI's activities in Bridge View demonstrates that NOI members are compelled to use their faith as a cultural tool for social change. The following field note from a demonstration in 2007 organized by the NOI in response to the environmental poisoning occurring next to their school serves to illustrate this point. The demonstration was attended by several hundred community residents who were not members of the NOI, which is important because it illustrates the power of Black Muslim cultural production in non-religious organizing in Bridge View. As is customary for the NOI-sponsored community meetings they opened with a prayer, this time from Pastor Jeff speaking in his native Samoan language. Minister Ali followed:

> Brothers and sisters we are very thankful in prayer cuz there is a movement and the movement has to be fueled by some power that moves…. The fuel or the energy that drives this movement is the spirit…. We are a spiritual people who have to be affected by the spirit and impacted by the spirit in order to really produce the longevity that this movement requires…. Justice is not something that happens right away…. You can fight for years for justice…. The oppressors and those who do things that are not proper to people who cannot defend themselves all the time wait out people who are angry because anger cannot sustain the movement…. You get into a fight cuz you're mad…. Well that can only carry you for so long…. See, when you're emotional you just jump out there….. You fight for a minute and then you get tired when you're not mad anymore…. But when you're operating on principles rooted in the spirit, righteousness, and justice…. And those principles are unchangeable, immutable, unbendable…. And when you're moved by principles that fight for principles is not something that can be purchased … nobody can offer you a job for it … nobody can offer you a home for it … nobody can offer you a grant or program for it….

> All we want is to see justice…. Those kinds of human beings are rare…. But it's those kinds of humans being that start, sustain, and build movements. So when you see these meetings open in prayer we asked last week your Latino brother who's a pastor to open our meeting in prayer…. This week Pastor Jeff from the Samoan community opened our meeting in prayer in his own native language…. That's important…. Because you know when you go to a reunion and you meet a family member that you didn't know was family that somebody introduced you to … 'Hey this is your cousin,' and you get acquainted for the first time with a cousin you didn't even know you had…. A long lost brother or sister you didn't know you had…. But you're bound and you're tied…. All you needed was somebody to introduce you…. We're getting introduced to each other…. .The African-American community is being introduced to the Latino community … we're being introduced to the Samoan community … to the Filipino community … to the White community…. We are all being introduced to each other…. Because we have all been the victims of injustice…. There's a scripture that says 'Justices stands afar off and equity cannot enter because truth has fallen in the streets'…. Imagine the truth being so disrespected that it's just dumped in the streets…. You know truth is not respected in San Francisco…. And the worse part about it is that some of our own leadership has a disregard for truth….

Culture is composed of the 'symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life' (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). 'These components,' according to Pattillo-McCoy, 'constitute the "tool kit," or cultural repertoire, of individuals and groups, and they are organized to create particular "strategies of action"' (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998, p. 2).[27] In the struggle against environmental racism, the NOI uses the power of prayer, call and response, self-presentation, code-switching, and the ideology of Black power for promoting political mobilization, neighborhood safety, youth development, conducting meetings, and holding rallies to name a few. These tools resonate with non-NOI African-Americans, as well as other people of color who are not members of the NOI, because they invoke a collective orientation of Islam and Christianity and 'draw strength from the belief in a direct, beneficial relationship to God' (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998, p. 768).

In Bridge View, not only are NOI members currently leading a burgeoning environmental movement, but the Fruit of Islam (the FOI is the security arm of the NOI) has been patrolling the neighborhood serving as a community watchdog for years in the besieged African-American community. In addition to the NOI fostering a climate of safety and public order in Bridge View, the organization over the years has participated in a number of public service activities to increase the social capital supplied to the community:

- door-to-door campaigns to increase community awareness concerning environmental and toxic waste;
- conducting community surveys regarding respiratory and other environmentally related illness;
- rehabilitating and cleaning up dysfunctional or abandoned housing stock;
- organizing walking groups for adult safety in public space;
- actively recruiting youth to join the organization;
- educating young people in- and outside the community at The School of Islam.

While the capability of the NOI as an informal social control mechanism in urban communities might be questioned in other cities, their work in Bridge View has been applauded by community residents. As one elderly woman attested:

> It is good to see people who really care about our community the way they do … and coming from a spiritual background … they kinda bless the community … they protect us in a way … they are reliable … they are dependable…. Proud of who they are and proud of who we are … it is honestly good to see Black folks that committed to themselves and to our community….

The presence of the NOI as a form of informal social control to protect Black communities demonstrates three ways in which social action is constructed by the NOI. First, the concrete concerns of fighting environmental racism, reducing neighborhood delinquency, and promoting neighborhood safety, education, and uplift are addressed through the cultural tools of Islam—specifically themes of deliverance and freedom expressed through Islamic rhetorical styles and behavioral mandates are aimed at 'rejuvenating a community gripped by … economic depression' (Washington, 1985, p. 92). Second, the NOI's organizational belief that all Black people are members of the NOI community, regardless of whether they are conscious of it, demonstrates how Islam is used for secular purposes that cross religious differences within and outside the African-American community. In this manner, some of the organizational goals voiced by the Bridge View community are 'socially realized' (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 50) through the practice of Black Muslim culture (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). And third, the NOI's strategy of community mobilizing through mass demonstrations affirms the group's commitment to social action and underscores their ability to create public support by using their collective cultural strength to coordinate community action (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991).

This data provide subtle commentary on theories of social isolation of the Black poor (Wilson, 1987) by illustrating the positive dimensions of social organization at work in low-income communities. In Bridge View culture mattered. 'Cultural conditions affected participation in ways separate from and irreducible to the neighborhood's structural conditions, even as the latter set constraints on the former (Small, 2004, p. 63). It also indicates how state structures play a decisive role in the formation and distribution of both formal and informal social capital, and how the lack thereof sharply narrows the resources collectively available to inner-city residents (Wacquant, 1998). These findings suggest that we re-evaluate 'the de-institutionalized ghetto perspective as a theory of the effects of Black segregation and depopulation, rather than poverty concentration, and *instead* approach neighborhood poverty from a conditional perspective' (Small & McDermott, 2006, p. 1697).[28]

In ghettoized neighborhoods like Bridge View, the NOI and the temples they represent are some of the last formal institutions to be committed to the welfare of the neighborhood and its residents. Amid the inner city, there are few organizations that are able to serve as intermediary agents when the critical state and social institutions responsible for providing civic goods and services whereby social capital is formed (for example policy-makers, developers, police officers) turn into 'instruments of surveillance, suspicion, and exclusion rather than vehicles of social integration and

trust building' (Wacquant, 1998, p. 25). The NOI and the Black church, by providing members with a strong spiritual base, political organization, and the community networks required for collective action, are two institutions owned and operated by African-Americans that help to bridge the gap between the local community and the broader society (DuBois, 1899; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998).

Conclusion

In this article I have used the analytical frameworks of social (dis)organization theory and negative social capital to demonstrate that, in ghettoized communities such as Bridge View, organizations such as the NOI often have to make up for, and in some instances replace, the public institutions responsible for providing key civic goods and services. Put simply, public and private institutions in low-income neighborhoods play a decisive role in maintaining low-income residents in marginal and dependent positions and organizations like the NOI play a decisive role in combating the absence of key public goods and services (Wacquant, 1998). This finding is important because it extends the research on negative social capital to include the relationship between public and private institutions as key factors in maintaining the marginalization of Black urban communities.

Additionally, these findings are sociologically significant because they begin to challenge the recent work of Putnam (2000) and others who suggest that America is experiencing dangerously low levels of civic engagement and community participation, especially in low-income communities (see Putnam 2000; Ginwright *et al.*, 2006). The NOI's form of community social capital has gone largely unnoticed among researchers and public policy-makers even though it begins to illuminate an important convergence between the fields of race and ethnic relations, community development, and non-formal dimensions of education and political mobilization. For example, when most people think of community participation they tend to imagine large numbers of community residents knocking door-to-door, participating in neighborhood clean-ups, or passing out information leaflets for upcoming events. Yet the NOI's organizational efforts are conducted by a relatively small number of people. This demonstrates what business economists term a 95/5 phenomenon, where a large amount of the activity (say 95%) is undertaken by a relatively small percentage of the population (say 5%) (Small, 2004). Viewing community participation as a 95/5 phenomenon sheds light on why community participation may be high even in the poorest of neighborhoods or the most disenfranchised communities (Small, 2004). Perhaps it is best summed up through the quote popularly attributed to anthropologist Margaret Mead, 'don't ever doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has'.

Finally, historians and social scientists alike have devoted insufficient attention to the evolution of Black power and Black self-determination in Black urban communities, have downplayed the effectiveness of grassroots mobilization, and 'have too often marginalized a broad and diverse set of strategies and analyses in favor of tropes of violence and alienation' (Self, 2003, p. 255). Yet, seeing the 'ghetto' through the lens

of Bridge View residents and the NOI provides an important counter-narrative to accounts of 'Black power as an emotional, rhetorical, and ultimately marginal and self-destructive political phenomenon' (Self, 2003, p. 255). This in turn forces us to engage in profound and important re-readings of political mobilization in the Black American ghetto and to think about the ways in which grassroots organizing has created 'free spaces'—places to revive one's culture, places to rejuvenate our spirits, places to form democratic or revolutionary visions of social change—in low-income communities (see Akom & Shoraka, this issue).

In terms of generalizability these findings may or may not be generalizable, depending on local context (see Small, 2004). However, future researchers may want to examine the difference between ethnic enclaves and the Black American ghetto in terms of access to key institutional resources and privileges and forms of state-sponsored social capital. Answers to these questions will help us to further understand how to define, and think about, the role of race and culture in the structure of social inequality.

Notes

1. The ethnographic data used in this article were collected through youth participatory action research (YPAR) a critical tool for social change, in which 'difference' and power relations are key lines of analysis (Lykes & Coquillon, 2006).
2. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States and Europe and there are 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide. In the United States Islam is growing at a rate that is expected to make it the second largest aggregate religious community—smaller than Christianity but larger than Judaism—by the year 2015 when it will have nearly doubled its estimated 1980 size (Haddad, 1986; Moore, 1995). Moreover indigenous African-American Muslims have been estimated to comprise roughly 30% of the total Muslim population in the United States (Nimber, 2002). However, there is a great deal of heterogeneity within the Muslim population ranging from Black Nationalist (NOI) to Islamic separatists (e.g. some Sunnis) to a more assimilationist ecumenical outlook (American Muslim Mission).
3. I have changed all names of people and places to ensure anonymity.
4. According to Small (2002, p. 2) 'Much of the work has been criticized for perpetuating a view of the ghetto as inherently pathological and disorganized (Abu Lughod, 1997; Wacquant, 1997). Thus, recent researchers have left neighborhoods' levels of organization as an empirical question, and argued for the terms 'differential social organization' (Sampson, 1999) or 'social organization' (Wacquant, 1997)'. The difference between 'differential social organization' and 'social organization', according to Small, is that the former emphasizes between-neighborhood differences at the expense of within-neighborhood change, a tendency that both Small and I critique.
5. According to Small, examples of structural conditions in neighborhoods are rising educational levels, residential stability, and stable material hardship.
6. Social disorganization and social organization are different sides of the same coin. Social organization examines how neighborhoods organize their resources, and is characterized, in part, by a neighborhood's ability to supervise teens, the extent of mutual trust among neighbors, and the efficacy of social networks to name but a few (Small, 2002).
7. For example, 'the realization of common values in support of social goods,' the 'collective socialization of the young,' and the 'enforcement of norms of civility and mutual trust' (Sampson, 1999, p. 247).

8. While most social scientists agree that ethnographic research provides an important tool for addressing these questions, the problem still remains that social disorganization theory has been defined in so many different ways that it means too many different things to too many different people (Small, 2004). As a result, this article abandons studying social disorganization theory, or the lack there of, in favor of studying a specific phenomenon—in this case Black political mobilization in relation to institutional racism and the remapping of the Black American Ghetto.

9. At the heart of this critique is the belief that poor urban neighborhoods are not disorganized but, rather, are characterized by alternative forms of social organization (Small, 2004; see also Whyte 1943; Gans, 1962; Suttles, 1968).

10. YPAR stands for Youth Participatory Action Research.

11. In terms of the three neighborhoods we are studying: one is a predominantly white American neighborhood, one changing from predominantly African-American to Mexican American and white American (as well as Eastern European), and one changing from historically African-American to Mexican American, Asian American, and more recently white American (Bridge View).

12. This Black out-migration Project is not the same as the Black out-migration Project funded by the Mayors of for Community Development in 2007 although the two projects do intersect and I am a lead member of both research and design teams.

13. We analyzed and coded two web documents in this article.

14. See the Participatory Action Research Collective website at: http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/who.htm

15. The exact report is not referenced because the article contains the real names of people and places in Bridge View. However, the 'naval Shipyard was established in 1869 as the first dry dock on the Pacific Coast, in southeastern San Francisco, California, adjacent to San Francisco Bay. In 1940, the Navy obtained ownership of the shipyard for shipbuilding, repair and maintenance activities. After World War II activities shifted from ship repair to submarine servicing and testing. The navy operated Hunters Point Annex as a shipbuilding and repair facility from 1941 until 1976…. The shipyard consists of 936 acres; 493 on land and 443 under water in the San Francisco Bay.'

16. According to the 2000 Census, San Francisco is the city with the lowest percentage of families with children among major cities in the United States,

17. See 2000 Census. An additional factor complicating Bridge View as a traditional Black American ghetto, besides its ethnic heterogeneity, is its high rate of homeownership and fairly low residential instability. According to one source Bridge View has the fourth highest homeowner rate in the city. This is most likely due to at least two factors: (1) Before the Naval shipyard shut down in 1974 many African-Americans were able to buy homes in racially segregated Bridge View because of a thriving local economy; (2) In 2006 a median-priced house in San Francisco cost more than $800,000, whereas in Bridge View a condo cost about $400,000, and a three- or four-bedroom home could be had for a bargain San Francisco price of $550,000. Due to the relative affordability of Bridge View in relation to other San Francisco housing markets, gentrification has been on the rise since the 1980s, pushing Black families out while increasing the rate of homeownership in the community.

18. One-third of the city's homicides in 2006 took place in Bridge View.

19. According to one source Bridge View has the fourth highest homeowner rate in the city.

20. A Superfund site is a hazardous waste site that is part of the US Environmental Protection Agency's (USEPA's) Superfund Program.

21. A Brownfield is an abandoned, idled, or underused industrial or commercial facility where expansion or redevelopment is limited because of environmental contamination. The exact citation for this article is not referenced because the article contains the real names of people and places in Bridge View.

22. The exact citation for this article is not referenced because the article contains the real names of people and places in Bridge View.

23. The exact report is not referenced because the article contains the real names of people and places in Bridge View.

24. Patriarchy in the NOI is a serious problem. That being said, it is no more of a serious problem than it is for any other major religion in the world including Christianity and Judaism. According to Ava Muhammad, one of the only female Ministers in the NOI: 'I'm asked about that a lot, when asked about women's leadership role in the religion…. My response has always been that the role of women in the Nation of Islam is really no different than it is in any other religion. Christianity, Judaism and Islam—all of which are necessary for the enlightenment of human-ity—all suffer from a similar affliction of being overly male-dominant, even in the interpretation of scripture. As the world becomes more conscious, and the Internet and other things level the playing field of knowledge, that's going to continue to change.' (See Fleisher, 2005.)

25. The exact citation for this article is not referenced because the article contains the real names of people and places in Bridge View.

26. The exact citation for this article is not referenced because the article contains the real names of people and places in Bridge View.

27. The sociology of culture and social movements has produced numerous conceptualizations of culture ranging from Goffman's (1974) 'frames' to Bourdieu's (1977) 'habitus.' However, most researchers have been unable to incorporate a sophisticated conceptualization of the role of culture and youth development into urban poverty theory. For example, how do young people work in partnership with adults to improve the conditions in their communities? Swidler (1986) begins to address this question by offering a definition of the cultural toolkit.

28. Emphasis added.

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